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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MASERU 000154

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S AND INR/AF:RITA BYRNES
CAPE TOWN FOR TOM SEEKER

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [SF](#) [LT](#)
SUBJECT: LESOTHO: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INTERVIEW REVEALS ORGANIZED
CRIME RING

REF: MASERU 107

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CLASSIFIED BY: Elizabeth C. Power, Deputy Chief of Mission.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (U) In preparation for the International Religious Freedom report, Poloff has been visiting and speaking to representatives of different faiths in Maseru. On Tuesday, May 5, Poloff interviewed prominent local businessman and member of the Muslim community, Ashraf Abubaker. Abubaker is a trustee on Lesotho's Islamic Council and has been hailed by some locals as "the richest man in Lesotho."

Muslims as part of Lesotho's religious population

¶2. (C) Abubaker stated that he feels, as post does, that religious freedom is enjoyed by all citizens of Lesotho. There is no pressure to join a particular religion, and members of many religions are among the most prominent citizens of the Kingdom. According to him, there is a community of approximately 1,000 Muslims in Lesotho, although he mentioned that some actually reside over the border in neighboring South African towns because of the housing shortage in Lesotho, the cheaper cost of living in South Africa, and the more secure environment. Approximately 80% of the Muslim community are Basotho of Indian descent, the rest are more newly arrived from India or Pakistan. (Note: The term "Basotho" may be used to denote either ethnicity or Lesotho citizenship. End note.)

¶3. (C) Abubaker stated that Muslims in Lesotho are all Sunni. He was adamant that there is no extremism present in the country. When asked, he affirmed that they do not practice Sharia law and would chase out anyone in the population who became too extreme. He said: "We would stop any nonsense happening."

GOL relations with the Muslim community

¶4. (C) Abubaker stated that the Islamic community here has plans to build a mosque on prime real estate adjacent to Maseru's new shopping mall that is projected for completion in October. The government of Lesotho has donated a 30,000 square meter (3 hectare) plot of land to the Muslim community. A local architect has drawn up plans for the structure, which Mr. Abubaker says will be a "landmark building." Plans for the project include a 700-800 person community hall, madrassa

classrooms, and housing for the imams. There are prayer houses scattered around the Maseru area, but no mosque in the capital city. Ladybrand, South Africa, the closest neighboring city, has a "sister mosque" attended primarily by Lesotho-based members of the Islamic community. He says that he was in charge of the building of that mosque. According to Abubaker, these neighboring South African mosques are regarded as Lesotho mosques because they were paid for by money from Basotho Muslims. He says: "You can't separate the two."

15. (C) Several years ago, the Libyan government offered to build a mosque for the Muslim community here. For political reasons, mostly involving in-fighting between the then Foreign Minister, Tom Thabane (now head of the opposition), and Minister Pontso Sekatle, who was then and is still the Minister of Local Government, this project never came to fruition. Talk of the project had died down until just before the 2007 national elections, when Abubaker said that the government brought it back up as a way of courting the Muslim vote in the country.

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What is the "Pakistani Mafia" doing in Lesotho?

16. (C) From this, he went on to give an example of an incident that occurred last year between the borders of Lesotho and South Africa. Abubaker mentioned that members of the "Pakistani mafia" had been seen walking around Maseru and interacting with Muslim businessmen, though the "mafia members" do not live in Lesotho, and are based out of neighboring South African towns. He insinuated that when he found out about this, he was one of the primary drivers in getting them shut down.

South African TV program tells story of murdered Lesotho
businessman

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17. (C) Abubaker gave Poloff a DVD copy of a South African program called "Carte Blanche," similar to the US program "60 Minutes," which had done an exposé on last year's death of a Pakistani businessman. According to him, the businessman based out of Maputsoe, Lesotho, went missing, and when his absence was noted by some of Abubaker's contacts, they tried to follow up with the police. When the police proved to be unhelpful, Abubaker brought in a private investigator from Bloemfontein, South Africa, who was able to locate the body of the missing businessman in Bloemfontein. Abubaker stated that the Commissioner's Office in Pretoria was furious when they found out that the police in Bloemfontein had issued arrest warrants in the murder case. According to him, the South African Police Service are well-paid by the mafia to stay out of their affairs. Abubaker says that his own name was kept out of the television program purposefully so that his role in this matter would not be known.

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Other online sources share versions of the story

18. (U) The clues followed by the investigator led to the eventual arrest of seven Pakistani "mafia members." According to online reports by "The Star," a South African newspaper, four were arrested in Bloemfontein and three in Pietermaritzburg.

19. (U) Another online source called the "Lowvelder" reported that the Pakistani gang is alleged to have been involved in at least seven murders. The gang seems to specialize in the kidnapping and blackmailing of wealthy Muslim businessmen. In the case of the murdered businessman from Lesotho, a two million rand (approximately \$200,000) ransom was demanded. According to

that same report, most of the mafia members are also members of the so-called Muttahida Quami movement, a radical Pakistani political movement connected with international terrorism.

Fraudulent use of Lesotho passports facilitates crime

¶10. (U) Most of the suspects arrested during this operation were carrying Lesotho passports. It is assumed that those passports were acquired through fraudulent means. In fact, a "member of the Pakistani underground" whose voice and face were disguised for the camera, stated on the Carte Blanche program that the suspects had paid 50,000 rand (approximately \$5000) in Pakistan for the fake documents and safe passage to South Africa. The two passports shown on the Carte Blanche program both have 21 DEC 06 issue dates.

¶11. (U) This same source stated that Pakistani and South African immigration officials are in the pocket of the mafia. He said that members of the group travelled from Pakistan to either Dubai or Kenya with no visas in their passports. When they arrived in either Dubai or Kenya, they were given fake visas to allow them to transit to South Africa. Upon arrival at OR Tambo international airport, it is alleged that corrupt immigration officials allowed them to enter the country.

Muslim community in Lesotho willing to work with GOL to weed out extremists

¶12. (C) Abubaker stated that one of the reasons the British have begun requiring visas for Basotho is the insecurity of Lesotho passports (reftel). He blames the government for not taking proactive measures to prosecute passport fraud. He gave the example of Botswana, whose residents can still travel to the UK without a visa. He stated that: "Botswana became proactive and deported individuals carrying fake passports." In his estimation, this is a major reason why the UK still does not require citizens of Botswana to have visas for travel to the UK. He mentioned that he has "volunteered to help GOL weed out people who are holding passports illegally within the Muslim community." He stated that the Muslim community in and around Lesotho is very tightly knit, and they know what's going on among their members. They would be able to identify and interrogate outsiders as to their activities in Lesotho. He claims that he told Foreign Minister Tsekoa that these people who are selling Lesotho passports, "are not selling the passports, they're selling the country."

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Online addresses where this story can be found

¶13. (U)

www.mnet.co.za/Mnet/Shows/carteblanche/story.asp?Id=3499

www.thestar.co.za/index.php?fArticleId=435555 0

www.lowvelder.co.za/newsitem.aspx?itemkey=513_a1c37-63b7-40df-89f6-a75cfaca0608

Comment

¶14. (C) Embassy Maseru does not have further confirmation of the facts of this case. Post's political specialist, who usually hears about this kind of event, had never heard of the incidents referred to in paragraph 6 above. There has been no local

mention of Muslim extremism connected to the 2010 World Cup, hosted in neighboring South Africa, nor any relationship asserted to the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister in April. Some of post's political and religious contacts are concerned about increasing rates of conversion to Islam among formerly Christian Basotho, but there are no concrete figures to indicate how many conversions are happening. Minister of Natural Resources Monyane Moleleki told Ambassador Nolan that the GOL is concerned about local conversion activities; in relation to the growing number of Muslims in Lesotho, Moleleki said to the Ambassador, "You should watch yourself."

¶15. (C) Although there is no indication that religious extremism is a part of Lesotho's Muslim community, the alleged existence of organized crime is worrying. Even more troubling is the lack of information by Lesotho's National Security Service (NSS) concerning Muslim extremism; our NSS contacts have no information about the Muslim community beyond a rough estimate of how many mosques are in the country. Post will continue to work with the NSS and our regional intelligence support to broaden the perspective of the NSS beyond merely watching the political opposition, with the goal of preventing Lesotho from being used as a transit point or base by terrorists and other criminals.

NOLAN